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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses public library services to remote communities in Australia, focusing on New South Wales (NSW). The first section presents background on the public library network in NSW, including statistics, descriptors/characteristics of public libraries, and funding to establish public Internet access. The second section addresses regional libraries in NSW, focusing on the Riverina Regional Library and the establishment of the Tumut Electronic Network Centre, a project that set up telecentres in several libraries; project aims and benefits are listed. The third section describes infrastructure, goals, and funding of NSW.net, a virtual private Internet network for libraries, local government, and communities. (MES)

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Access to Service: Rural and Remote Communities

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Proceedings

Access to Service: Rural and Remote Communities

Robert Knight

Introduction

There is little doubt that rural and remote communities throughout Australia are doing it tough. We hear almost daily of the closure of this agency or the withdrawal of that service, and then promptly forget about it. But it is not until you come face to face with these towns and their constituents that you can even begin to understand their battle for survival. I refer to this syndrome as "rural shrink" because that's exactly what is happening to much of rural Australia. It's hard to say whether the population is diminishing because services are being withdrawn or that services are being withdrawn because the population is diminishing, but there is ample evidence of these losses. Nevertheless there is one agency that does seem to remain constant despite all the other closures - and that is the public library.

Background

In this presentation, I would like to go a little wide of the mark that is indicated in the abstract in order to let members of the audience in on Australia's best kept secret - the public library network. I do promise to touch on the issues mentioned in the program about the delivery of alternative services via public libraries so that I won't be appearing here today on false pretences, however to successfully do that I need to paint a word picture that includes some facts and figures, some anecdotes, and just a little bit of political flavour - just as well we aren't at dinner where discussions about politics and religion are strictly forbidden.

My comments pertain mainly to NSW because that is the region that I am most familiar with, but discussions with colleagues from other states indicate that I could just as easily be referring to any and all parts of Australia.

Public libraries have a long history of co-operation which is in evidence not only in NSW, but throughout Australia and the world. Collaborative strategies have been established through both formal and informal channels to optimise funding and resources, which are and remain historically low for the support of libraries.

The public library network in NSW includes 372 branches which service virtually every community in the state. NSW Libraries are jointly funded by State and local government in the ratio of 10% state and 90% local. There are some 3 million registered library members representing 49% of the total NSW population. In 1998/99 over 45 million items were lent from public libraries which is 7.2 items per person, and there are more than 2,000 full time equivalent staff employed in NSW public libraries. As a matter of interest, there are more libraries in NSW than there are McDonalds! Australia wide there are almost 1,600 public libraries which attract some 90 million visits each year (or almost 5 visits per person per year).

I have provided you with these statistics to give you an idea of the scope and extent of the NSW Public Library network in very basic terms. To translate this information into descriptors of public libraries, the following statements are true:

- **established network** - libraries are part of an established network, and quite often a

number of established networks. They already have partners and are experienced networkers

- **public places** - libraries are public places freely accessible to all the community and are open long hours including evenings and weekends
- **staffed by information professionals** - libraries are staffed by people who are trained in the information business
- **existing infrastructure** - libraries as we currently know them reside in buildings which provide the entire infrastructure required for them to perform their function. They are therefore well placed to extend their function to other areas
- **highly valued and well patronised** - libraries have strong community links, with 50% membership across the state and over 30 million visits each year statewide and 90 million nationally. Over 95% of the Australian population consider libraries either very important or important in their community
- **part of a broader organisation** - libraries are financially supported by their local councils and communities. There is potentially considerable strength and many resources to be drawn from this association
- **community focal points** - libraries are a focal point for the communities which they serve; people already attend libraries for a broad variety of purposes
- **wide geographical distribution** - libraries enjoy a wide geographical distribution; there is access to a library of some description almost everywhere in Australia
- **co-operation between different levels of government** - public libraries are jointly funded by state and local government
- **multi-focussed service providers** - libraries have an expanding brief to adopt broader roles such as acting as government transaction centres

This unique blend of characteristics strongly positions public libraries in remote, rural and regional areas of NSW to expand their role as multi service points for their communities.

This opportunity has been largely overlooked by state and federal governments in past successive attempts to provide equitable access to services and technology to rural constituents. The Federal Government's Department of Primary Industries and Energy telecentre/telecottage initiative in the early 1990's sought to establish technology access points for rural and remote residents in various locations throughout Australia. Funding of $2.8 million was allocated over a four year period, and funding criteria included the requirements that the telecentres be community based (operated by a community organisation), were partly community funded, and offered both training and employment opportunities to community members. This strategy provided funding for the initial 3 year phase of the program, with the aim of each telecentre achieving sustainability at the end of the funding period, thereby enabling them to continue operating as community access points. Unfortunately, the majority of these centres failed to achieve the required level of sustainability and closed either at the conclusion of the funding period or shortly after.

An article that appeared in the Financial Review on 29 August 1995 said:

> *"Telecentres - touted as an aid to decentralisation and a means of bringing technology training and job skills to people in the bush - have been pretty much of a flop.*
>
> *The Federal Government put money into the concept through its Telecentres Program, but as someone said, this has just splashed dollars on the wall.*
>
> *It seemed like a good idea and an interesting social experiment to boot. But there are few success stories and those who have backed the concept are now afraid of throwing good money after bad.*
>
> *The problem seems to have been that more importance was placed on the technology than on the management and where the work would come from. And that critical element, community support, was in some instances totally absent.*

> *How many facilities are now operating under the loose term "telecentre" is not known. SkillShare offices, Open Learning centres and the like, have all lined up for telecentre funding. But once that expires many will fall back into obscurity - "*

However, had these telecentres been established in public libraries where all of the characteristics described previously would have contributed to the success and longevity of the strategy, I feel confident in saying that every one of them would still be operating today thereby facilitating ongoing access to technology for remote, rural and regional residents. Ironically, the NSW public library network has assumed this responsibility by default and is in the process of establishing an extensive technology access network known as NSW.net.

On 6th December 1995 the Keating Labor Government, during its final term of office, developed a strategy known as the Innovation Statement which pledged $11.4 million to public libraries throughout Australia to establish public internet access for all Australians. This was a very significant political decision for public libraries because it acknowledged the suitability and appropriateness of the public library network to provide an electronic access point for Australians as well as establishing a delivery mechanism for online government information. The Keating Government was voted out of office before this strategy was implemented, and the incoming Howard Government reduced the funding allocation to $2.2 million and made it competitively available through the OPAI (Online Public Access Initiative), completely diminishing the opportunity for the establishment of an Australia wide public internet access network at that point in time. Since then, many millions of dollars have been distributed by the Federal Government through the Networking the Nation strategy (using funds from the partial sale of Telstra) however to the best of my knowledge there is still no nation wide public access internet network in place - and the public library network is still ready, willing and more than able to facilitate and optimise that opportunity.

Regional Libraries in New South Wales

The public library network in NSW has long been optimised by the formation of regional library services which are particularly prevalent in rural and regional New South Wales. There are 23 regional libraries operating throughout the state, providing services to a total of 1.5 million constituents in 104 local government areas, and covering some 390,000 sq km - a significant geographical area of the state. The regional library network is one of very long standing. The advantages of the regional library structure have stood the test of time with a number of regions that are still operating successfully today having been formed over 50 years ago in the 1940's.

Like most regional organisations, regional libraries form mutual associations to take advantage of economies of scale, professional support, resource sharing, improved service outcomes, and shared infrastructure (both physical and technological). It is largely due to the regional library structure in rural, remote and regional New South Wales that branch libraries are able to remain operational in small towns, and that delivery of regular mobile library services to many outlying communities is maintained.

It is particularly interesting to observe that, in the current environment of withdrawal of many services and agencies from "the bush", including post offices, banks, medical services and government services, one agency remains constant, operational and open for business - and that's the local public library. In fact, the more services and agencies that are withdrawn from rural communities, the more the public library becomes recognised as **the** community focal point, meeting place and access facility for a broad range of purposes.

My own library Service, the Riverina Regional Library, is a joint library service between 9 local government areas in southern New South Wales, serving a population of some 102,000 residents.

Although distances between the central library at Wagga Wagga and other branch libraries are not vast (averaging 100km), some of the communities served have populations of less than 100 people. The library service has branch libraries in 12 towns throughout the Riverina as well as a mobile library which delivers library services to 24 small villages including a number of isolated

communities.

In order to maximise library service provision to as many residents as possible throughout our client area, a number of innovative partnerships have been developed with agencies that may not have been seen as traditional public library partners in the past. The first joint TAFE/public library in NSW has been established at Cootamundra; a joint use school/public library operates in the ex-Snowy Mountains Scheme village of Talbingo; the local post office-come newsagency provides a library service to the residents of Ariah Park; Australia's highest town, Cabramurra, which is located in a National Park and as such does not actually "belong" to a local government area, runs a book exchange to meet the library needs of its residents; and, of course, the faithful mobile library which is not unusual in itself except that it is our second busiest service point.

It is very much the focus of the Riverina Regional Library Committee and myself as Director to promulgate all aspects of library service within our region, and to work towards the recognition of our libraries as public spaces which go far beyond what may be perceived as "traditional library business". It is not so much where or with whom libraries set up shop as it is the opportunities they bring to communities; hence our obsession (well, not quite, but almost!) with finding ways and means to infiltrate as many towns and villages as possible throughout our region with library services.

This philosophy is common amongst the New South Wales public library network, and it remains the very strong focus of local government and its libraries to provide the full suite of library services to all residents - and that means delivering services to some very isolated residents!

Tumut Shire Council, one of the 9 member councils of Riverina Regional Library, has recognised the potential of the library network in its local government area. Tumut Shire has a population of 11,100 people and provides library services to its constituents at branches in 4 towns. The political and geographical environment of the Tumut Shire necessitates this abundance of libraries, and rather than cringe at the expense associated with their operation, Council has optimised the library infrastructure. Branch libraries are utilised as transaction centres for residents to conduct council business such as payment of dog registrations and land rates. Community groups and individuals are also utilising their libraries as meeting places and display facilities; strategic partnerships have developed between libraries and groups such as the local family history group and adult education providers, reinforcing the perception of the library as a community focal point

The most recent and significant development for the Tumut Shire Council and its libraries is the establishment of the Tumut Electronic Network Centre, an initiative funded by the Networking the Nation program.

This project was initiated in 1998, and set up telecentres in libraries at Tumut, Adelong, Batlow and Talbingo with the aims of:

- raising the awareness of local communities about technology services and applications available through the telecentres
- renovating and preparing the existing libraries to house the telecentre facilities
- providing ongoing training and support for telecentre users
- implementing strategies to ensure the long term viability of the telecentres

The benefits for the communities have been:

- vastly improved access for all residents to information via the internet
- equity of access to technology for people who are disadvantaged financially, geographically or educationally
- raising the awareness of the community about new technology and its relevance to groups and individuals
- availability of training in technology applications
- facilitating the development of community information and business networks

- provision of access to distance education courses available online
- installation of the first regional satellite point-of-presence
- a joint project with the Tumut Region Development Board to develop an online business database for the region

There have also been significant gains for the library in terms of a new community perception, increased patronage and the availability of more services which I don't have time to detail today. But suffice to say that there are four branch librarians who have a lot to smile about.

Although the Tumut Electronic Network Centre has not quite met usage expectations in its first year of operation, and some other projected opportunities did not eventuate, this vital community access project will remain in place because it is situated in the existing infrastructure of the public library network and is supported by local government, unlike the 1990's telecentre initiative referred to previously.

NSW.net

The public library network in NSW in partnership with the State Library has developed a virtual private internet network for libraries, local government and their communities. This initiative was initially enabled by state and federal grant funding, and has more recently received significant endorsement from the NSW state government in the form of $8 million in funding during its current term.

NSW.net aims to provide the following infrastructure to all councils and central libraries in NSW under the first two phases of its implementation:

- permanent high-bandwidth connection to the internet for a set per annum cost
- state-wide Virtual Private Network (VPN)
- network consortium for purchasing of information and other services
- facility for members to become content providers and utilise e-commerce capability
- training program

The design goals of NSW.net are based on providing a simple, fast, scalable, secure, equitable and cost-competitive statewide networking solution.

Further funding of $4.9m is currently being sought from the NTN program to extend connectivity to "the last mile" - the remote and isolated communities in the state - through a project called Rural Link.

The emergence of NSW.net further establishes libraries throughout the state as the ideal network for the provision of a wide variety of public and private sector services at the local, state and national levels.

Conclusion

The public library network in New South Wales has emerged as a leader in bringing technology access and solutions to remote, rural and regional New South Wales. It has unparalleled infrastructure, community recognition, and accessibility which makes public libraries an obvious choice as community technology access points and online information delivery points for all levels of government.

There is still much work to be done. As suggested in the abstract, pilot programs of satellite connectivity to the remote NSW towns of Manilla and Brewarrina have begun as recently as this month; there is potential for the provision of "mobile banking" using mobile libraries which is yet to be successfully negotiated; many libraries are transacting business on behalf of their councils; in

fact there are scattered examples of libraries providing innovative services to communities all over Australia.

What is not happening is the availability of a co-ordinated government funded approach which recognises and optimises the amazing networking potential of Australian public libraries. The opportunity exists for public libraries to be utilised to assist remote, rural and regional communities not only to survive, but also to develop and prosper.

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